Interservice Relations

The Army and the Marines at the Battle of Okinawa

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As joint operations become more and more common, a review of previous such operations can provide some useful experience. The Battle of Okinawa in World War II seems particularly relevant.

The Tenth Army, which invaded the island, was an amalgamation of Army and Marine combat units. Naval officers served in support and staff positions. The commander, Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., U.S. Army, worked hard to establish good rapport with his Marine subordinates, but he failed to take into account the differences in combat doctrine between the Army and the Marine Corps, which allowed an interservice dispute to develop.

Interservice rivalries were almost unavoidable in the invasion of Okinawa. The Tenth Army that Buckner commanded was the product of two different services, with distinctly different approaches to fighting. The main combat units in this field army were the III Marine Amphibious Corps and the Army's XXIV Corps. According to Army doctrine, the proper way to destroy an enemy was through the use of overwhelming firepower in a head-on confrontation. The mission of the infantry was to find and hold the enemy force; the artillery would then destroy it. To succeed, these tactics required the materiel superiority that only a long logistical tail could provide, and they did little to win admiration from either friend or foe. In Europe, German generals held U.S. infantry in contempt, respecting only the American artillery. British and French officers in North Africa called the Americans "our Italians."

Marine doctrine was different in both focus and method. During the interwar period, the Marines had made amphibious assault their specialty. Marine methods also called for a combined arms assault: Naval gunfire would soften up enemy coastal fortifications, and aerial support would cover advancing ground troops. Marine tactics stressed maneuver on a short supply line. Marine training emphasized esprit de corps and discipline to a far greater extent than did Army training.

Problems began during the planning of this joint operation. The Tenth Army staff planned the invasion but ignored the differences between the two services, writing a plan that emphasized Army tactics and assigned similar missions to both Army and Marine divisions. At the same time, the staff of Admiral Chester Nimitz expected that preliminary air and naval operations would give the U.S. command of the air and sea, but also expected strong Japanese counterattacks from Formosa and Southern Japan. As a result, these Naval planners emphasized mobility and combined arms operations for rapid conquest of the island that would reduce the exposure of Navy ships. To accomplish this task, the staff of the Tenth Army decided to have the army land on the west coast, just below the neck of the island. The Marine III Amphibious Corps would take the northern section of the island, while the XXIV Corps marched south.

Concerns about interservice relations had even played a large role in the assignment of Buckner as commander of the Tenth Army. On 7 October 1944 Buckner recorded in his diary, "Admiral Nimitz, after sounding out my attitude on the Smith vs. Smith* controversy and finding that I deplored the whole matter and harbored no interservice ill feelings, announced that I would command the new joint project." For his part, Buckner designated a Marine, Major General Roy S. Geiger, commanding officer of the III Amphibious Corps, to serve as his successor in case he became a casualty. The two generals got along fine with each other.

Although Buckner did exceptional work in preventing interservice disputes and developed a good working relationship with his main Marine subordinate, he did little to alleviate the differences between the Marine and Army units. Buckner was a firm believer in U.S. Army doctrine. During the battle, he explained his strategy for winning to a group of reporters: "We're relying on our tremendous fire power and trying to crush them by weight of weapons" (*New York Herald Tribune*, May 2, 1945). Buckner treated his Marine divisions like Army infantry divisions. This failure to appreciate the differences between the types of units under his command actually exacerbated the disputes between the two services.

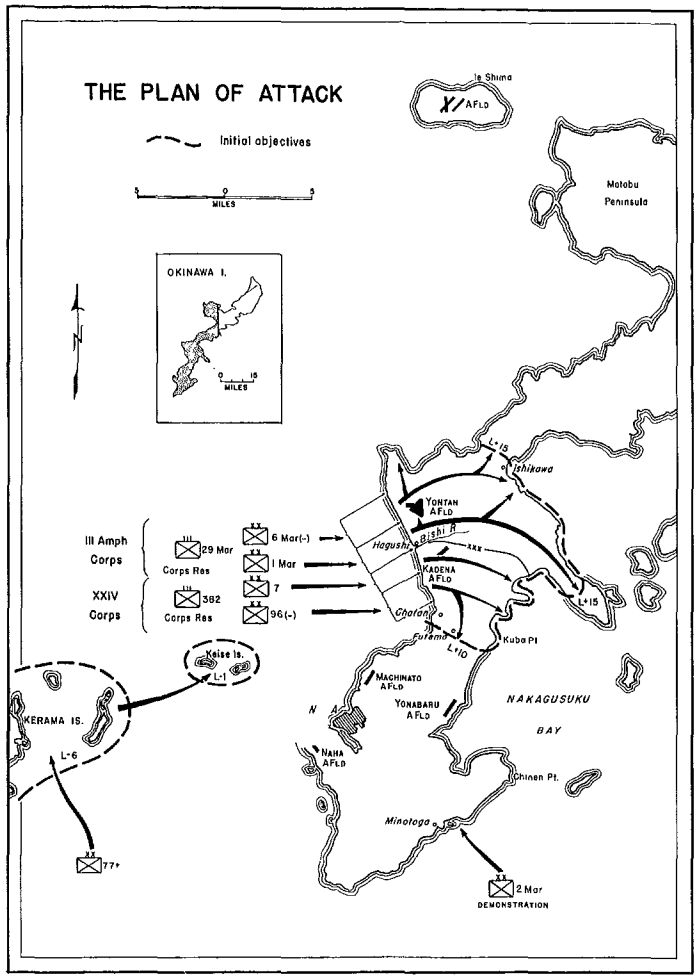
At first these differences seemed irrelevant. The American invaders enjoyed some early success on Okinawa. The landing on the beaches went uncontested, and the 1st Marine Division raced across the island, enjoying

*During the battle on Saipan, Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith, a Marine and commander of the V Amphibious Corps, had relieved Major General Ralph Smith as commanding officer of the 27th Infantry Division, a substandard National Guard unit. The 27th Division occupied the middle of the American line and made the least amount of progress, creating a U-shaped salient that jeopardized the Marine units on either side.

the temperate, dry weather and reaching the eastern coast on April 4. The Marines reached the northern tip of Okinawa on April 13 and secured the Motobu peninsula on April 20 in an advance that was almost painless.

This success was deceptive, however, because the Japanese had intentionally conceded the northern end of the island to the Americans. The Tenth Army's success came to a sudden end when the XXIV Corps began its march south.

On April 4, the same day the Marines reached the eastern coast of Okinawa, several infantry divisions made contact with the defensive lines of the Japanese 32d Army. The Japanese goal was to disrupt "the enemy's plans by inflicting maximum losses on him, and, even when the situation is hopeless, holding out in strong positions for as long as possible." After a careful analysis of Okinawan geography, Colonel Hiromichi Yahara, senior officer in charge of operations, accurately predicted the location and size of the American invasion force. In a memo to Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, the commanding officer of the 32d Army, and the chief-of-staff, Lieutenant General Isamu Cho, Yahara argued that they lacked the strength to defend the beaches and suggested that the army defend only the militarily valuable southern half of the island, conceding the landing and the unpopulated north to the Americans. The mountainous geography of this region made it impossible to build airfields in the area and limited its military importance. Ushijima and Cho agreed with Yahara and adopted his proposed strategy. They ordered the construction of three defensive lines, using an interconnected system of tunnels, blockhouses, pillboxes, trenches, caves, and Okinawan tombs, many of which had overlapping fields of fire that channeled American attackers into prepared lanes of fire. These fortifications, which were on both the reverse and forward slopes of hills, neutralized the effectiveness of American artillery and the invasion plan itself. The 32d Army also had more artillery than any Japanese force the U.S. had encountered in the war, including a six-month supply of ammunition. This defensive posture effectively sealed the fate of the island and determined the outcome of the battle. The contest would be a bloody siege of attrition, which the Americans would win only if they could afford to pay the cost in casualties.



Second-Landing Controversy

A controversy soon broke out over a strategic proposal to minimize contact with the Japanese fortifications and over Buckner's use of Marine units. Major General Andrew Bruce, U.S. Army, commanding the 77th Division, suggested that the Tenth Army stage a second landing on the southern tip of the island, using his unit and the III Amphibious Corps. Bruce was a fighting general, and Buckner approved of this willingness to fight. He said, "Bruce, as usual, is rarin' to go and is looking well ahead of action. I much prefer a bird dog that you have to whistle in to one that you have to urge out. He is of the former variety." But the issue hardly registered in Buckner's diary. He looked at his supply lines—which reflected his grounding in Army doctrine—and said no to the second invasion. Many of the Marines on the Tenth Army staff, and, more important, General Geiger, agreed. When he later explained his decision to the authors of the Army's official history of the battle, he said a second landing would have been "another Anzio, but worse."

There were many, however, who liked the idea. Some Marines enthusiastically endorsed the proposed second landing. On June 4 the Sixth Marine Division, with only 36 hours notice, had made an amphibious landing across the open sea in front of Naha harbor. The Marines had landed on Oroku Peninsula, which was to the south side of the harbor. The Marine division's commanders thought another amphibious assault would also work. (After the war, both Major General Pedro A. Del Valle, Commanding Officer of the 1st Marine Division, and Major General Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., commanding officer of the 6th Marine Division and later Commandant of the Marine Corps, claimed that a Marine division had enough internal supplies to operate for a month free of a supply line.) Support for this idea was not limited to the Marine corps. The commander of Army ground forces, General Joseph Stilwell, who was visiting Okinawa on an inspection trip at the time, was impressed with the proposal: "Bruce is the only man I've met who remembers his tactics," he recorded in his diary. Stillwell, however, had less

positive things to say about Buckner: "Tactics all frontal. 6th Marine landing S. of Naha only attempt to go by. No thought of repeating it. Buckner laughs at Bruce for having crazy ideas. It might be a good thing to listen to him." Stillwell also found the general staff of the Tenth Army wanting: "There is NO tactical thinking on push. No plan was ever discussed at the meetings to hasten the fight or help the divisions."

As the battle continued, the decision became controversial. Homer Bigart, war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, filed a story that was critical of Buckner's rejection of a second landing. He called Buckner's Army tactics "ultra-conservative." In his view, "A landing on southern Okinawa would have hastened the encirclement of Shuri. Instead of an end run, we persisted in frontal attacks," he wrote. "It was hey-diddle-diddle straight down the middle."

Thus, an honest dispute about tactics was soon twisted into an interservice dispute. Syndicated columnist David Lawerence, using the Bigart article as his main source, claimed an amphibious assault would have saved American lives. In one of his two columns about Okinawa he started with a loaded sentence: "Why is the truth about the military fiasco at Okinawa hushed up?" He blamed Buckner and the Army for conservative tactics. In a deliberate distortion of the facts, Lawerence wrote that the Marines' rapid conquest of the north was ample proof of the soundness of their tactics. He demanded an immediate investigation into Buckner's decision.

The second-landing decision became an interservice dispute, partly as an indirect result of unequal press coverage and an effort on the part of the Department of the Navy to manipulate media coverage in its favor. Working in the headquarters of Admiral Nimitz, at the personal insistence of Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, Captain Harold "Min" Miller arranged support for reporters, giving them access to communications facilities so they could send their stories back to their news agencies, providing them with copies of newsreel footage, and letting them visit the front lines and travel with Marine units. Press coverage on Okinawa favorable to the Marines naturally followed this institutional support. Soldiers fighting for their country value recognition, whether in the form of combat decorations or news stories. Major General John Hodge, commanding officer of the XXIV Corps, even complained about media coverage in a four-page memo. "I have been able to find but little mention of Army troops fighting their hearts out in the last twelve days of the 82-day battle," he complained. "These [stories] get back to soldiers from their families and makes for bitterest feeling toward the Marine Corps where there should be and normally is a feeling of great friendliness and mutual respect between individuals of the two services." He also suspected the reason: "The press was naval controlled and Navy-minded to a great degree."

Buckner dismissed the allegations from the press. In a letter to his wife, he wrote, "We have splendid relations here between the Army, Navy and Marine components of my command in spite of unpatriotic attempts on the part of certain publicity agents at home who are trying to sir up a controversy between the Army and Marines." He also responded forcefully at a press conference on June 15, but the only publication that gave extended coverage to this conference was the *New York Herald Tribune.* The purpose for taking the island, Buckner said, was to use its airfields to bomb Japan, and build it up as a base for the invasion of the main Japanese islands. The second landing was only one of the issues Buckner discussed. He explained that the geography of southern Okinawa ruled against a second landing. Reefs would have made an amphibious assault difficult, and the hilly terrain would have made it easy for the Japanese to contain American forces on the beach. "If we'd scattered our forces we might have got licked, or it might have unduly prolonged the campaign; or we might have been forced to call on additional troops, which we did not want to do." He explained that economy of troops was necessary, because the congestion of more units would have slowed down construction of the airfields. "We didn't need to rush forward, because we had secured enough airfields to execute our development mission."

Buckner also had defenders in both the Navy and the press. When Nimitz read the Lawerence columns, he responded with a statement that attacked the journalist and defended Buckner. A reporter for the Associated Press wrote that the admiral's statement was "rare" in its bluntness. Bigart and the *Herald Tribune* backed away from their earlier criticisms of Buckner, which denied Lawerence any cover. "This correspondent still believes that a landing on the south coast of Okinawa would have been a better employment of the Marines," Bigart responded. "But to call the campaign a fiasco is absurd. The writer covered the Italian campaign during the Anzio and Cassino actions and he knows what a fiasco is." The editorial board of the *Herald Tribune* later noted that Bigart's report "did not on its face, warrant the conclusions Mr. Lawerence drew," and "would seem to leave Mr. Lawerence open to merited rebuke."

Stilwell and General of the Army Douglas MacArthur were also critical of Buckner—and were far more important than Lawerence. When Stilwell returned to Manila, he met with MacArthur and told him what he had seen. MacArthur had clashed several times with Buckner over manpower and supply issues, and had had enough. He declared his intention to replace Buckner and asked Stilwell if he would accept the assignment. At the time, the command of an army was an assignment for a lieutenant general, and MacArthur wanted to know if Stilwell would accept, even though he was a general. Stilwell said he would gladly accept any command assignment.

Stilwell became the commander of the Tenth Army a few days later, when Buckner was killed in a Japanese artillery barrage. For him, Okinawa offered lessons for the pending invasion of Japan. He told General of the Army George C. Marshall, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, that he expected a larger scale version of the battle for Okinawa: "The

terrain in Japan is rugged and lends itself to defense; unless we are prepared for the conditions, we are likely to meet not only a determined defense in well dug-in positions in depth, but the fanatical opposition of the entire population, who will resort to any extremity to oppose us." It was important that the U.S. Army avoid employing frontal assaults exclusively: "In future operations, some feint or diversionary attack should be added to the main attack in order at least to make the Japanese face in two directions."

Any assessment of the American combat leadership on Okinawa should keep the problems that Buckner faced in perspective. He worked hard to establish good personal relations with the command element of the other services in the Tenth Army. But an interservice dispute developed despite his best efforts.

Several things went wrong, some of which were beyond his control:

- The enemy fought tenaciously and neutralized American advantages in a battle of attrition, even though this effort conceded to our ultimate victory.
- Staff planning had failed to consider the differences in doctrine between the components of the American ground force.
- Press coverage was unequal, possibly the direct result of service manipulation.
- Planners refused to reconsider options, other than those found in doctrine, that could have more quickly overcome enemy resistance.

General Buckner's mistake in this joint operation was that he did not fully understand that the differences between the services were more significant than just uniforms and traditions, or that interservice cooperation should have involved more than good personal relations.

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